

# Feeney to take GOP's top spot on space panel

**He says securing work for employees of Kennedy Space Center is a top priority**

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WASHINGTON -- Convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff may yet indirectly help the political fortunes of U.S. Rep. Tom Feeney of Florida.

The Oviedo Republican said Tuesday that he will take over as GOP leader on the space subcommittee, part of the overall House Science Committee.

Why the open slot?

The previous GOP leader, Rep. Ken Calvert of California, left his "ranking member" post to fill a vacant seat on the House Appropriations Committee. That seat was available because its former occupant, U.S. Rep. John Doolittle of California, stepped down after an FBI raid on his Virginia home in connection with the Abramoff corruption scandal.

Feeney has had his own troubles with Abramoff, stemming from a 2003 golf junket to Scotland that the two men took.

When Feeney first told Congress about the trip, he reported that a conservative think tank paid for it. But later, investigators found that Abramoff footed the bill through a "slush fund" worth millions.

Lobbyists are forbidden from paying for congressional travel. Abramoff pleaded guilty last year to bribing public officials.

Feeney since has given \$5,643 to the U.S. treasury to repay what he said was his share of the trip. The three-term congressman also has denied knowing that Abramoff paid for it, and said he filed his disclosure forms in good faith.

Federal investigators recently asked at least three Florida newspapers for more information about the trip, although Feeney has denied being a target.

"The bottom line is that we've always followed the law," Feeney said Tuesday. "There are no new developments. I think we're in good shape."

As the new ranking member, Feeney said his top goal is ensuring future work for employees of Kennedy Space Center, where some jobs are in jeopardy as NASA edges toward retiring the space shuttle in 2010.

Feeney said another priority is upgrading the country's military capacity to combat the growing Chinese space program, which soon could challenge the U.S. military advantage in orbit and beyond.

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